

Staten Island
Places and People on the Island
Peculiarities and Attractions

Correspondence of the Evening Post, August, 1862.

BOX IV

General description
of the Island,
with comment on
places and people

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STATEN ISLAND.

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PECULIARITIES AND ATTRACTIONS.

[Correspondence of the Evening Post.]

STATEN ISLAND, August, 1862.

There are three Staten Islands in the world. One of them is in the Pacific ocean, another in the Terra del Fuego group, and the third just here.

This one is peculiarly a lovable place. Rich, green and sunny, it sparkles on the bosom of our Bay like an emerald set in blue enamel, and is the finest of the many brilliant jewels of New York. Kossuth, years ago, went into raptures over it, as he landed at Quarantine from the ship that brought him to peace, freedom and a popular ovation—and I only borrow his metaphor when I call it an emerald. Kossuth may have been prejudiced in its favor. Very likely he was. So am I—and to be in good company is the next thing to making one's self good company.

ILLUSIONS DISPELLED.

A New Yorker born and bred, I was one of some dozens of people (to put the case no more strongly than personal experience bears me out in putting it) who once had not the remotest idea that a charming spot like this existed within a half hour's sail of the great City. I conceived the popular notion that to go to Staten Island was to catch yellow fever and cholera, fall into the hands of villanous Sepoys, and wind up with a severe fit of "the shakes," which would bring in the undertaker to finish the adventure you had undertaken. Filled with horror at the idea of undergoing all this needless misery, when I could be comfortably packed like a herring in an up-town car, and swelter my jovial way homeward in the old style, I virtuously refrained from visiting Staten Island for many a long year.

Recently, however—and here note the effects of female influence—I wound up a long and wearisome search for a roof-tree by a desperate push in this direction. Taking heart of courage, and resigning myself placidly to the wise guidance of my wife, I came house-hunting hither. Mrs. Richmond, excellent woman, is bold as a lion, and when I hesitated over a tradition of chills and fever here, or a trace of the ravages of cholera there, laughed me out of countenance, and said, "Try it"—and I did.

Briefly, therefore, that is how I came to be a citizen of Richmond county. Richmond county is Staten Island—and Staten Island is Richmond county; unless, indeed, the Island should be annexed to New Jersey, in which case I shall immediately emigrate.

URBAN AND SUBURBAN.

I know there are many innocent persons who think they are out of the world when they are in the country; but did such misanthropes ever try the virtues of a place which is at once rural and urban—where gas chimneys alternate with tree-tops, and speaking-tubes and bell-pulls pierce the walls that the ivy shades? Staten Island is a compound of town and country; full of rural beauty and peopled by men and women who bring to broad and verdant acres the refinements and elegances of metropolitan life.

FIGURATIVE.

An enterprising but somewhat statistical friend of mine has gone to the trouble of ciphering out the topography, population, resources, manufactures, and general history of the island; fulfilling his task with that degree of commendable perseverance which is the sure mark of an unerring intellect. But I shall not trouble you with the results of his arithmetical investigations, figurative and pleasing though they be. He and I together could furnish an array of statistical information concerning Richmond county which would astonish your readers, fill a gazetteer, or make the fortune of an enterprising publisher; but, inasmuch as I set out to give you a summer letter by the sea-shore, excuse me if I omit the numerals until a more convenient season comes.

THE SITUATION.

Staten Island, then, in all its five townships, possesses a certain sum of attractions which wins for it a close-knit regard and something which much resembles affection. The Bay, spreading and widening from Long Island to New Jersey, darts out two lithe and sinewy arms as it comes within hugging distance of this "tight little isle," and embraces it with extreme fondness. The dexter arm, stretching gently along the western shore, is labelled "The Kills"—the left, holding the eastern slope of the hills, is ticketed "The Narrows;" so here we lie snugly moored, the ocean bathing our feet, the great bay cooling our head, and our body protected by these strong yet pliant arms of the sea.

PLACES AND PEOPLE.

There is a contest for supremacy between the "North Shore" and the "Eastern Shore" of the Island. It is hard to say which has the better of the squabble. A "North-ender" will tell you that there is positively no drawback to the unparalleled elegance and luxury of his section; and the "East-ender" (or East-sider, properly speaking) insists, with a lofty disdain, that the narrow lots of the North-end are equalled only by the narrowness of the people's minds and the feebleness of their purposes. Neither of these premises is correct. There is a peculiar sort of aristocracy in each of these divisions of the island and its people—and hence cliques. Each clique cherishes a profound reverence for its own traditions, and regards the "fellow over the way" with supreme contempt. The truth of the controversy, as usual in such cases, lies midway of the two extremes. Permit me to state it:

The region round about New Brighton, taking Blancard's big hotel as a radiating point, is populated by a host of visitors in the warm season, and inhabited perpetually by a social and pleasant company of citizens whom the rigors of the winter do not frighten. The houses of these permanent residents are open to friends and not frequented by strangers. The latter go to Blancard's, stay till frost, and then take the earliest boat back to town; the former run in and out of each other's domestic hives, buzz together in a cheerful and enlivening manner, and find a vast deal of fun in quiet little whist-parties and private dances and talks around the glowing coals when wintry winds sweep down the Bay and make the waters shiver. In short, New Brighton and its neighborhood is essentially a social and jolly place—when you get acquainted in it.

On the way over to the other side of the country you can make along the shore a detour of the backbone of the Island, which swells into humps and hillocks—or go directly over the hills. If the latter, you pass place after place that attracts your eye by the beauty of the view and the elegance of the adornment. This is the “hill-property” of Staten Island. Here are a dozen or two fine mansions, surrounded by ample grounds and sequestered from the vulgar gaze. The highest point is known by the popular but uneuphonious name of Toad Hill. The banker who has built his eyrie on its peak, however, entertains a serious repugnance to this plebeian designation, and if you accost him with the remark: “You live on Toad Hill, I believe, Sir?”—he will inevitably glare upon you and retort: “*Toad Hill, Sir?—no Sir; Todd Hill, if you please!*” It is very necessary to observe this distinction. The aforesaid eyrie on Todd or Toad Hill is the highest point on the island—and I believe the house is the biggest. Its occupant and owner is well known in Wall street, and can be found just around the corner in Broad.

On the peak of another of these hills lives George Law. Almost any summer afternoon “Live-Oak George” is visible on board one of his own ferry-boats, lolling leisurely in a “one-horse shay” somewhat the worse for wear (both man and horse), and carrying the weight of three hundred pounds and ten millions with apparent ease. His old rival, Commodore Vanderbilt, also has a place here, used as a summer residence, but he is not seen so often as he was when the “new line” demanded his personal attention to the ferry business. As to the ferries, George Law now has everything his own way. Vanderbilt has backed out of the opposition scheme, and boats and men and good-will (?) are now held strictly according to Law.

CLIFTON AND ITS RESIDENCES.

Getting over the hills, or around them, as the humor seizes you, a short walk of three or four miles brings you from the north side to the east, and lands you at the upper end of New York avenue. This is the grand artery of Clifton. It is studded with handsome estates, the sizes of which vary from five acres to twenty and thirty. The Gignoux, the Aspinwalls, the Townsends, and many other old families, own splendid properties all along this avenue and on the roads which diverge from it. Here, too, is the largest church on the Island—the Roman Catholic one of St. John's, over which presides Father Lewis, a Belgian and a faithful priest.

A notable feature of this part of the Island is its superb private green-houses. To make their conservatories complete and beautiful in every way is the ambition of one, two or more of the wealthy men whose property lies in or near this section. In Mr. Gignoux's grounds there is a bevy of green-houses which contain rare flowers brought from extreme corners of the earth, with a total disregard of consequences or cost; but the laurels of these glass palaces are closely contested by Mr. Green, who yields to none in the ardor with which he pursues the art of floriculture and any gardener who has anything nice to sell. The male members of these two households may be observed on board the boats with choice articles of perfumery in the natural state stuck in their button-holes of a pleasant morning, and the visitor at their homes comes away buried in the bunches of fragrance that hospitable hands press upon him at his departure. I hope the mention of these names may be pardoned, for every man who cultivates the beautiful merits a public recognition.

NOTABLE PEOPLE.

Scattered over the Island—on the Fingerboard Road, Clove Road, and all the other “roads” with odd names, at New Brighton, Clifton, on the hills and in the valleys—there are numerous well-known persons who make their homes on Staten Island from year's end to year's end, and “would not live away” in any other place. Let me call over a few of their names: First, “The Lounger”—he of *Harper's Weekly* and the Nile—who eats his Lotus-leaf in quiet on the North Shore, and lives a life of sweet content, charming the circle of his friends by his suavity and genius. Close beside him his father-in-law, Francis George Shaw, dispenses an elegant hospitality. Mr. Duncan, the banker, sits cosily here by his own altar-fires after the bustle of a lifetime in Wall street. Hither, too, come Mr. Cunard, from the European steamship office, and Mr. Cisco from the task of paying the government's little bills of millions a day. Charles Mackay, the poet, lives on the Fingerboard Road, and comes down regularly in the afternoon on “the five boat.” (Islanders never say “o'clock” when referring to their boats; it is always “the five boat” or the “six.”) Mr. Mackay is an object of curious attention, now that he distinctly avows himself the New York correspondent of the *London Times*. Men point him out to women, and women say to each other: “There's Charles Mackay!” He is not particularly complimentary to us Americans in these same letters, but let that pass; everybody speaks well of him personally, and he enjoys a pension from the British government for his contributions to literature. Then there are bankers, merchants and railroad kings who live here; among them Mr. Mayer, Mr. Fellows, Mr. Marsh of the Erie road, and others whose names go a great way in town.

NEWSPAPER MEN.

Moreover, the newspaper press is well represented here. The *Times*, *Tribune*, *Herald*, *EVENING POST*, *Commercial Advertiser*, *Harper's Weekly*, and I don't know how many others, have either editors or “stated contributors” among the permanent residents of the Island. Indeed, the “old war-horse” of Tammany Hall is reported to have found in this circumstance an explanation of the favor with which the Sepoys' plaint was regarded by the New York press in the dreadfully-exciting days of the Quarantine rebellion. Said the excellent Mr. Purdy (so the story runs): “The papers have come round so suddenly to the side of the Sepoys that I couldn't understand it till I found that every d— one of them had an editor or an *attaché* living on Staten Island.” This was putting the case strongly, but it was so far true that the leading journals did actually come at last to say that the yellow fever hospitals should *not* be kept on the Island—which was true.

FINALLY.

I wanted to say a great deal more, but I won't. There is material for a whole novel in the Seaman's Retreat and the Mariners' Snug Harbor, but I must leave these places for another time; and there is a cheery little circle of old ladies in a quiet “Home” of their own, where I sometimes gossip of a Sunday, and which I would like to describe; to say nothing of the memories of Garibaldi—who once made candles here—or of the ins and outs of the Island itself, its resources and pleasantnesses—its small but virulent handfull of secessionists, and its intestine feuds and other matters—all of which you are probably glad to get rid of, for to-day at least.

RICHMOND.

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